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MINISTRY TO INACTIVES

A MANUAL FOR ESTABLISHING A LISTENING WITNESS TO INACTIVE MEMBERS

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MINISTRY TO INACTIVES: A Manual for Establishing
a Listening Witness to Inactive Members

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Preface

It was Jesus who said, "Go and make disciples of all nations," and Paul who said, "Do the work of an evangelist."

The biblical mandate both inspires and haunts the Christian. Often we do not get beyond the "ought" to the "joy" of discovering quality relationships in—and through—the church. Many times our efforts are given to mundane tasks or day-to-day church chores. "Church work" can become dull and may overshadow the good news of the love of God for persons. It is sometimes easy for us to become overburdened and uneasy with "church work" and fail to see the communion of saints as a warm and real relationship of honest people. There is danger of losing the heart and center—the good news of being loved by God and being able to love and accept others, no matter what they have or haven't done.

As long as the church functions primarily as a moralistic community of enforcers of right and wrong, it will reflect a judgmental and legalistic stance. Inevitably this means that it will condemn *all* people for all sins. Truth, morality, and righteousness are important life-and-death issues, but since all human beings are sinful, self-centered, and therefore defensive of their "goodness" and ashamed of their "badness," there are only two ways (in the midst of such brokenness) to achieve an ongoing relationship: one is by power and force and the other is by trust and love.

Power and force are important factors in all human relationships. They have been used by governments, courts, legislatures, parents, societal leaders, businesses, and churches to achieve order and meaning in society. We delegate power to certain individuals and—when rightly used—power can benefit human life. Some seize power, abuse power, or simply do not understand how best to use the power they have. There are various expressions of power: monarchy, democracy, dictatorship, friendly persuasion. Churches also employ a particular kind of power (or "polity") by which they operate.

Paul talks in Romans about the "power of the Gospel." What is that power and how do Christians use and communicate that power in evangelizing the world? When we confront power or authority we have two options for response: one is loyalty, faithfulness, and willing co-operation; the other is rebellion, rejection, and aversion. Even God's power can be rejected (witness the cross).

When speaking for God, groups within the church have too often given in to the temptation simply to "turn up the power," to enforce the "right." In the church, as in the rest of the world, this use of power has led to division, separation, conflict, and war. The basic message and purpose of God—and the mission of the church—is lost when a posture of power is sought, when "rightness" is pretended and "wrongness" is not admitted.

Evangelism does not mean using muscle to power right over wrong, or good over evil. Evangelism is a healing, reconciling, unifying ministry of one person to another by the grace of God. It is forgiven people practicing the forgiveness they have received. There is more than one way to do battle with evil. The use of force, however, is not the heart of "gospel ministry." As long as believers imply that "we are right" and "you are wrong," there can never develop quality relationships of love and trust. At best there can only be power balances or (more likely) imbalance, struggles, mistrust, and enmity. The prevailing mentality becomes winning versus losing.

Evangelism is a confidence in the good news, the gospel, the gracious, forgiving love of God in Christ who creates and recreates all things. It is believing that because God loves the whole world and all its people, I can learn to do so too.

In many congregations a segment of the membership feels distant, uninvolved, left out, or "turned off." For reasons of which they themselves often are not aware, the good news doesn't sound "good" to them. They are uncomfortable, hurt, angry, or frustrated. Often as not they blame themselves. Very often these feelings are painful and difficult to identify. Sometimes these feelings focus on specific acts or persons in the church, but just as often they lie deep within the anxieties and insecurities of their own being. These hurts are barriers to quality relationships in families, in marriages, in the church, and with God. It takes a lot of love, patience, care, and personal understanding to work through the defenses these people have put up to protect their tender inner selves.

Because the church is a voluntary organization, based on faith and trust, any ministry to those who are alienated ought not barge into their personal lives. How, then, do we act both responsibly and in a caring manner at the same time? This is a question with which many pastors, church council members, and evangelism people struggle. We acknowledge a large mission and ministry right in our own neighborhoods. It is a ministry that needs careful attention and the best skills of both laypersons and clergy—a mission of sharing the good news.

In order to be as effective as possible in relating the gospel to "turned off," alienated, inactive people, it is important to be equipped in relational skills as well as in doctrinal understandings. It is as important to be caring as it is to be right—maybe more so! The training and commissioning of persons to be evangelists is a basic mission of the church. The pastor's ministry, shared with others, multiplies and enriches the mission and ministry of the body of Christ to be about its task of proclaiming the love of God.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving advice
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem,
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked, was that you listen;
not talk or do—just hear me.
Advice is cheap: 25 cents will get you both
Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.
And I can do for myself; Im not helpless.
Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do
for myself, you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But, when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel,
no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince
you and can get about the business of understanding what's
behind this irrational feeling.
And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I
don't need advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we understand
what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people
because God is mute, and He doesn't give advice or
try to fix things. "They" just listen and let you
work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me. And, if you want to
talk, wait a minute for your turn; and, I'll listen to you.

Anonymous

CHAPTER 1

The Gift of the Gospel

"But now in union with Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's Blood. For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace. This was his purpose, to reconcile the two in a single body to God through the cross, on which he killed the enmity." (Ephesians 2:12c-16, NEB)

The church has one gift to offer the world—the gospel. The gospel, which is the good news of God's love, is the supreme treasure given to believers to share with all people. God's love is specifically given in the life of Jesus Christ. Sharing the good news is both a happy and a puzzling task. It is happy and exciting to be among the people of God who celebrate and respond in thanks and praise for his goodness and love. It is sheer joy for a believer to participate in the life of a worshipping, serving, and living congregation of saints. It seems puzzling, then, that some people who call themselves Christian do not participate in the life of the institutional church. They are reluctant to respond to any invitation. They seem apathetic or even hostile to the good news of Christ.

Most human communities can be divided into three groups: the inner one-third are the responsible, load-bearing core. The middle third are the participating, observing group. The outer third are peripheral, distant, apathetic, members-in-name-only. This seems to hold true whether for a camera club, a 4-H group, or a congregation.

In the Christian church the task of evangelism falls to that "inner one-third" of responsible people who feel it is the call of God to relate to, respond to, and care

about the others in their congregation and community. But it is this ministry of the church to the "inactive" that is its most difficult and embarrassing task. It is a task that we have not talked about, prayed about, and thought through with enough openness. It is imperative that we take a careful look at this ministry if we are to function as the people of God which the New Testament describes.

It is easy to imagine the following conversation taking place in an evangelism committee or board of deacons meeting. The chairman might say, "It looks as though we have about 24 families here at Zion Church which have become inactive this year. They have neither come to communion nor contributed. Has anybody seen the Hanson family?" Someone replies, "Aren't they the ones whose son was sent to reform school? I haven't seen them around lately." The chairman continues, "How about the Nelsons?" Another replies, "Didn't she used to be a den mother when their boy was small? I haven't seen them since their son went off to the university." Again, "How about the Meyers?" A reply: "Wasn't their son killed in Vietnam? They used to be active." And again, "How about the Schultzes?" And a last reply: "He was Sunday school superintendent back in '69, but come to think of it, I haven't seen much of them lately."

The tendency not to have noticed, to ignore signals, and even to show hostility are not unusual responses. Congregational constitutions set guidelines by which "active membership" is judged. Can we find a better way of ministering on behalf of the gospel? It should be possible. We need not let our anxiety and our hostility prevent us from honestly and personally sharing the gospel with our inactive members. The gospel is not served by our merely removing cards and names from our rosters.

A concept of central significance in Christian theology is that of *justification by faith.* For Martin Luther the biblical statement "the righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17) was the key; it became the cornerstone of the Reformation. (see also the letter to the Ephesians). With this biblical doctrine Luther battled against the works-righteousness emphasis of the medieval church. Luther, like St. Paul, taught that we cannot win forgiveness and salvation by good works. Even though we affirm and honor the doctrine of justification by faith, there has crept into protestant practice the subtle—or not-so-subtle—idea that we are accepted for what we do rather than for who we are. The message still comes on loud and clear—the church is for "good people." We take for granted that it is the task of "religion" to attack and punish evil and to affirm and uphold the good. Yet in our call to minister to persons (especially in our evangelism ministry—sharing the gospel), we need to think through very carefully the cultural and religious overtones. Without careful forethought, our wish to bring good news results in our bringing bad news.

In the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians the word for God's ministry is "reconciliation." In the book of Romans the word is "justification." For Paul both words have similar meaning. Justification has to do with "making (things)

right." Reconciliation has to do with going out to the home or place where there is enmity, to bring people together. *Good News for Modern Man* says it this way:

"No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. Our message is that God was making all mankind his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how to make them his friends. Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends!" (2 Corinthians 5:16-19, TEV)

The words "changing into friends" is the Good News translation of the word *reconcile.* That is the task of evangelism. That is the task of ministry. Paul warns against judging by human standards and urges us to see people, even people who are enemies—even those caught in sin—as potential friends of God and of one another. That, also, is what justification means. We have often failed to understand that when God declares a sinner righteous, he is in fact declaring a former enemy to be a friend.

It is tempting to segregate people in groups—which is in essence what the congregation does when it talks about "active" and "inactive" members. The dividing is usually based solely upon attendance at worship, the giving of money, and attendance at Holy Communion. Persons are therefore informed subtly (or not so subtly) that they "pay" for active membership, either by attending communion or by giving a donation. When they have fallen from grace into inactive membership they are made to feel that they must earn their way back by paying the price (by attending and contributing). Holy Communion and worship, intended to be grace experiences, become instead instruments of the Law. Thus, techniques of proclaiming the gospel actually turn the gospel into "law" because they have not been tempered with the ministry of caring and understanding.

But the gospel is declared not to things but to people. People have hurts and needs. The gospel meets people where they hurt and where they feel need. Law is what increases hurt and increases need. Let us not turn the *gospel* into *law* through a lack of understanding and a lack of caring.

Jesus scandalized the religious leaders of his time by befriending sinners and outcasts. The church that bears his name has the opportunity to offer friendship, recognition, and understanding to hurting people. We can approach hurting people because God has first come to us and has first loved us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel is intended to be experienced, felt, and understood. The evan-

gelist's task is to bring the gospel as gospel and not have the gospel felt as another *law*. The Christian is motivated, informed, and energized, not by a desire to punish evildoers, but rather by the love of God which seeks to share life in its fullness. The gospel is neither reward nor punishment, but gift. The gospel is not passive, but dynamic. The gospel is not intellectual and abstract, but personal and relational. The gospel is not legal, but loving and affirming. The gospel is not cheap or permissive, but the "power of God unto salvation to those who believe." The gospel is not manipulative and dehumanizing, but affirming, human, and God-like at the same time.

The gospel is not about controlling, but rather caring. The word *care* finds its roots in the Germanic word "kara" ("lament"). The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with.

Often, when we ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we find that they are those who, instead of offering advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. A friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief or bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, who can face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

The caring friend is present for the other person regardless what may happen in the external world. Caring means, first of all, being present for one another. From experience we know that those who care for us become present to us. When they listen, they listen to us. When they speak, they speak to us. And when they ask questions, we know that it is for our sake and not for their own. Their presence is a healing presence because they accept us on our terms, and they encourage us to take our own life seriously and to trust our own vocation.

No wonder that the sharing of the good news is such an exhilarating experience. Can we help one another more truly to present the gospel as the gospel that it is? Can we help one another to escape turning the gospel into the *law* which it is not?

We can!

CHAPTER 2

Turned-Off People

"As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you . . . was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes." (2 Corinthians 1:18-19, RSV)

Among the most common of human feelings is that of loneliness. Our individuality and our personhood are shaped by the unique characteristics of maleness and femaleness and other related aspects of individual personality. Our individuality can be both blessing and curse. It is a blessing in that we are unique. It is a curse in that we are different (in the sense that we are thus separated from others). We waver and wobble between the blessedness and cursedness of our individuality. We long for fulfillment, affirmation, and acceptance in our individuality. We ache in and wonder at, our different-ness. We long to belong. We strive to achieve. We want to be recognized. In our affluent American lifestyle we grasp for independence, freedom, mobility, privacy. In our serial marriages, we seek someone to fill our loneliness. We buy houses and things to fill our hours. When children grow up, when marriages end, when houses rot, and when things wear out, then freedom is lost, privacy is invaded, and we are distraught and angry. We remain lonely still.

The hunger for acceptance becomes an appetite that roars within us. Such needs in people are both a problem for the church and an opportunity for ministry. They are a problem because many people believe that the church, with its gospel, should be a solution to their aching appetites. When their appetites are not appeased, they search in another direction to find themselves. They may say, "The church has turned me off." And sometimes they are right. Their need provided an opportunity for the church to minister, but its message missed the mark.

We have sometimes used the term "inactive" to describe the persons who have participated in the church and its life for a period of time and then stopped participating. The term is often used to categorize people simply in terms of movement of "body activity"—a definition which does not deal with their emotional, physical, or spiritual hungers. We may be ignoring the real needs and struggles of such persons. Also the term suggests that if a person is coming to worship service, or is physically present, or is "active" then all needs are being met. Both assumptions are inadequate. If we are to do effective ministry of the gospel with one another, we need both to understand and to think carefully about the nature of the needs of people and of the nature of the fullness of the gospel. A paragraph in the parish constitution establishing criteria for membership cannot be the last word. The gospel addresses us not only on a level which is measurable by physical activity but on the level of the whole human mind, body, and spirit as well. Congregations still need constitutions. But they also need personal and loving interpretation by caring people. Constitutions need to be written mindful of each person's individuality and separateness, elements in the mystery of what it means to be a human being.

The "active" people in the congregation often attribute certain names to—or develop certain feelings toward—"inactive" persons. The chart below contains information that was volunteered by members of congregations. These feelings and names represent barriers, labels, and stereotypes. With them church members reduce other people to non-person status either out of fear or hostility.

"ACTIVES"			"INACTIVES"	
How they see "Inactives"	How they feel	LABELS, STEREOTYPES BARRIERS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS	How they see "Actives"	How they feel
dropouts	frustrated		hypocrites	condemned
delinquents	fearful		do-gooders	forgotten
do nothings	anxious		nosy	left out
inactive	worried		fussy	lonely
lazy	hostile		nitpickers	rejected
backsliders	suspicious		bosses	abandoned
sinners	full of pity		"in group"	angry
complainers	sympathetic		judges	suspicious
excuse makers	puzzled		high & mighty	having failed
	embarrassed		meddlers	apathetic
				no longer caring

What we often do not realize—or do not know how to handle—is that "inactive" people, for their own reasons, have their set of names and feelings too. And the longer these de-humanizing labels and stereotypes continue to be operative in our midst, the more they become destructive, divisive, and separating.

Evangelism does not mean waiting for the "inactive" to "come to us," but rather it means that God's people, who know and experience and love the gospel, begin to examine their own attitudes. It means examining the methods and the messages by which the evangel is expressed. Our ministry to the "inactives" begins by overcoming certain attitudes and names in order that the energy and love of the gospel may rightly and lovingly motivate us. If an "inactive" person who may feel abandoned or rejected sees the "active" person as a hypocrite or a "do-gooder" or a judge, and is then visited by someone who treats him as a drop-out or delinquent, the results could be empty. Or, they could be explosive! The gospel enables us, through grace and forgiveness, to accept people where they are and to begin genuinely to care about them. It enables us to come in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner and thus to *model* the gospel as well as to speak the gospel. The evangelist comes not as "good" to visit "bad" but as person to person, equal to equal, human being to human being, sinner to sinner. Such directness, equality, and genuine caring can be a marvelous vehicle for the gospel. We ought not underestimate the power of such an approach.

If we think of those we are to visit as "good-for-nothing" rather than (for example) Mr. and Mrs. Schultz, individuals toward whom we may be disgusted, angry, frustrated, puzzled, or fearful, we create enormous difficulties for doing evangelism work. If we think they see us as "nosy" or "do-gooders" and they feel like misfits who are rejected or have been abandoned by their congregation, then there is a problem that must be addressed carefully before going any further. But first, let us clearly identify some appropriate vehicles for ministry to the inactives (and, conversely, those which are inappropriate for sharing the good news).

Inappropriate vehicles include all methods which depend upon aggressive behavior: force, pressure, intimidation, shock, and embarrassment. People use such vehicles in order to control, persuade, or manipulate others. We are aware of their use in our society, in our athletics, and in the way people relate to one another. They are basically destructive and unworthy of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even the word "win" can be uncomfortable for Christians: it is a word taken from the world of competition. Almost without exception the word is foreign to the Scriptures.

Vehicles appropriate to communicating the gospel include reconciliation, love, shepherding, and ministry. These are biblical concepts. Christian evangelism embraces them as worthy methodology. In Luke 15, the pictures of evangelism have to do with search. The shepherd searched for the one lost sheep without

laying condemnation or judgment. The housewife searched for the one lost coin out of love (she sees the *worth* and *value* of the lost rather than drawing *judgment* upon the lost). And there is the more complex–but very personal–parable of the father and his two sons: the one ran away from home in rebellious wastefulness and the other worked at home in self-righteousness. But the father waited and prayed and loved and gave all that he had to both sons.

There is, throughout all three of these parables, a note of rejoicing and thanksgiving, and of the gracious love of God which reaches out with respect–and even with a measure of restraint–to the lost (even the word *lost* is not a condemning word, but a compassionate term). Worthy goals for ministry have to do with bringing people together again; not judgment, not condemnation, but forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, reuniting, sharing, even celebration and joy, thanksgiving and work. We need to have the goals of our ministry clearly in mind and to let them inform and direct our action. The method becomes part of the message and the method actually is a very important part of our life. A common philosophy within the society in which we live is that "the end justifies the means." If it "works"–produces results–who cares what method one uses? This philosophy is neither biblical nor Christian. It is crucial that we choose carefully our methods as well as our message. We dare not give mixed signals or bad news when intending to give good news.

At the beginning of the eleventh century there was a Norwegian King named Olaf. On one of his pillaging tours of England, Olaf was converted to the Christian faith. Returning to Norway he gathered together the Viking princes of the provinces of the west coast of Norway. They met on an island called Bomlo. There he made a persuasive speech to his princes saying that now Norway should become a Christian country. He commanded them to baptize the people of their provinces into the Christian faith. If they should encounter any difficulty he would be glad, he promised, to send his army to help persuade the reluctant. This evangelism program spread throughout Norway. North of the village of Voss, however, there were some farmers busy haying. When informed by their local leader that they were to come into the village for baptism, the farmers said, "No, we will not come, we are busy haying." The prince warned them of the consequences, that unless they responded to the order the king's army would capture and slay them. The farmers decided to stand and fight. With forks, clubs, scythes, and spades they lined up in great number against the king's small army. The soldiers were armed with bayonets, swords, spears, and armor. The farmers, though they outnumbered the soldiers, began to tremble and soon raised the white flag of surrender. "We will be baptized," they said, "so that we may go back to our haying."

The zeal of King Olaf's evangelism program is to be commended, but its method jeopardized its message.

Two common evangelism methods are the "get tough" style and the "be nice"

style. The first says, "Be as unyielding as possible; stick to the truth, to the principles, to the confessions; become a defender of the faith and talk about the holiness, the righteousness, and the law of God." This "position of strength" is one of vigilant power and energy, and the result is to weed out the drop-outs, get tough on those who do not shape up—or show up—or live up—to the expectations of God and of the congregation. A word like "excommunicate," and aggressive forms of organization and administration, fit this pattern.

The "be nice" style says, "Be very accepting, permissive, gentle, caring, loving." But what often results is weakness—lack of clarity and purpose. There is usually very little growth or stimulation. Things do not change.

Neither of these positions is very helpful, nor is either consistent with the gospel. Yet a program of Christian evangelism finds some validity in both styles. The concern for truth and principles in the "get tough" style and the expression of love in the "be nice" style are both valid. But genuine caring evangelism does even more. It takes seriously the realities of good and evil, the paradoxes and ambiguities of sin and grace, law and gospel, human sin and human worth, human lostness and human reconciliation. It is in that terrible yet wonderful arena that we are called to live as Christians. What some have called caring evangelism can also be called "Listening Witness."

THE TELEPHONE

I have just hung up; why did he telephone?
I don't know. . . . Oh! I get it. . . .

I talked a lot and listened very little.

Forgive me, Lord; it was a monologue and not a dialogue.
I explained my idea and did not get his;
Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing,
Since I didn't listen, I didn't help,
Since I didn't listen, we didn't commune.

Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected,
And now we are cut off.

—Michel Quoist

CHAPTER 3

The Ministry of Listening

"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."

(Philippians 2:4-7a RSV)

A central question people ask when called to participate in the ministry of the congregation is, "What shall I say to people?" A more appropriate first question to ask in relating to others is, "How may I learn to listen and understand?"

The church is "the people of the book," but before there was the book, there were the people. The church has less to do with words than it does with people, with the reality of human relationships and the wholeness of human life. Our words are used to describe that reality, but if they become a substitute for that reality, how impoverished and cheapened they become. In the "Smalcald Articles" of the *Book of Concord,* Martin Luther says, "The Gospel . . . offers counsel and help against sin in *more than one way*; God is surpassingly rich in his grace: 1) through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world; 2) through baptism; 3) through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; 4) through the Power of the Keys; and finally, 5) *through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.*" We have known the resource of the gospel from the pulpit, the font, and the altar. We have invested tremendous amounts of money, effort, and time in building churches for preaching, for liturgy, for communion, and for baptism. We have built halls for education, counsel, and decision-making; but the gospel comes in more than one way. Have we realized the treasure we have in the gift of *listening?*

We need to understand, utilize, and affirm the gift of listening. We have known the ministry of the gospel primarily from the pulpit and altar. But the gospel can be encountered as well around kitchen tables, in the homes of people where our

concern in listening enables us to be the message. The word dialog simply means "two people using words," or "two people sharing meanings or truth." Unfortunately, we have often felt that listening is unimportant or useless (we have valued talking so much). We have put such an emphasis on persuasion and "winning" that we have not had the patience or willingness to learn, appreciate, and understand one another through listening. We are a very word-conscious and talkative people. We are not very good listeners. People with problems are willing to pay professional listeners considerable sums of money to listen with skill and care. Their hurts and problems may be so deep or profound that no one else will or can bear to listen.

Listening can be a very effective tool for sharing the gospel because in a marvelous way it communicates an understanding of, and appreciation for, another person. In listening one comes not as an expert or a superior but as one who is concerned. In listening there is not monolog (one person speaking) but dialog (two people speaking and two people listening). There is tremendous opportunity when the church's members say "we are willing to listen" as well as "we are willing to speak."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *Life Together,* speaks of the "ministry of holding one's tongue." He says, "It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him. This prohibition does not include the personal word of advice and guidance, but to speak about a brother covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and goodwill; for it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief."

Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. One will then be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging, condemning, or putting them in their particular place where ascendancy can be gained and thus doing violence to that person. Through listening one can allow another to exist as a completely free person, as God made him or her to be. Whereas previously we may have considered the other person a nuisance and an affliction, now they are a source of joy for us. God does not will that we should fashion other people according to the image that seems good to us, that is, in our own image; rather in their very freedom from us they reflect how *God* made them in *his* image. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation.

In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer describes the ministry of listening:

> *"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning*

to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

"Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

"Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening. There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfillment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God. It is little wonder that we are no longer capable of the greatest service of listening that God has committed to us, that of hearing our brother's confession, if we refuse to give a listening ear to our brother on less subjects."

Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Christ himself, the great listener whose work they should share. We need to listen as God listens, that we may speak God's Word. Read the Gospel of John's account of the conversation that Jesus had with the woman at the well in Samaria. Marvel at Jesus' skill in listening. The dialog, the shared meanings, and the progression of two people talking and listening to one another provide an insight into the possibilities of life and growth when people genuinely care and listen and talk with one another. Jesus was communicating his love for this woman by the way in which he listened to her, as well as by the way in which

he spoke to her. That listening skill and intent needs to be affirmed in the church, in the neighborhood, and in the home. Listening is a skill that can be learned just as one learns to ride a bicycle.

In learning to listen, interestingly enough, there needs to be some modification of particular styles or ways in which we have related to people in the past. Listening means taking the time and the patience to understand people's meanings, not merely hearing their words. Listening is being willing to patiently understand and check out what other persons are feeling as well as what they are saying. All human beings have some difficulty saying what they really mean, and it takes some attentiveness and concern along with a great deal of patience to learn to know what another person really means. If our own meanings and feelings become uppermost in our mind, we may not be able to hear what others are saying.

A woman went to a doctor and began to describe her ailment. She mentioned only one symptom. This immediately aroused within the doctor's memory a concern for his wife who had a similar symptom. He spent the whole time talking and thinking about his own wife. He forgot to pay attention to the needs of the patient! Conversations can easily take these kinds of zig-zags and detours. Being a caring listener means being willing to lay aside our own agendas and needs in order to tune in to a person. Listening means laying aside our great need to talk and to tell—or even to heal or to help—so that attention can be given to the needs of the other.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Aging, The Fulfillment of Life,* has this sentence: "Quite often our concern to preach, teach or cure prevents us from perceiving and receiving what those we care for have to offer." Listening is not just a passive skill (being quiet), but listening is really wanting to get involved—without being nosy or pushy—in the words, attitudes, feelings and trust level of another human being.

When we are trying to defend ourselves from others, we withdraw into fortresses from which we can attack their vulnerable points. But when someone shows a hospitable attitude, extends the hand of friendship, drops the weapons of battle, and exhibits an attitude of interest, caring, and appreciation, it becomes a serendipity moment for the discovery of relationship. That is what good listening is all about.

Have you ever had the experience of meeting a person and later having said, "That person was easy to talk to"? What you were saying, no doubt, was that you sensed that someone really listened to you and cared about who you were and what you thought. The Christian ministry of evangelism is communicated through that kind of caring person.

An elderly woman once told this story: "I was so happy when one day a nice, young student came to visit me and we had such a marvelous time. I told her

about my husband and my children and how lonely I often feel. And as I was talking, tears came out of my eyes, but inside I felt glad that someone was listening. But then—a few days later—the student came back to me and said, 'I have thought a lot about what you told me and about how lonely you feel . . . and I've thought about what I could do to help you . . . and I wonder if you might be interested in joining this club we have. . . .' When I heard her saying this, I felt a little ashamed, since I had caused so many worries for this good young person. The only thing I wanted was someone to listen."

In our ordinary conversation, we often greet one another with, "How are you today?" That is an opener with real listening possibilities; the key word in the statement (and in a listening stance attitude) is the word "you." If you are good friends and if time permits, that opening, caring statement can lead to some good and happy conversation. But we have used this greeting carelessly, and spoken it to people whom we do not know, or when time was too short and thus reduced the possibility for sharing. The standard answer to "How are you?" is, "Fine" (whether we are "fine" or not!).

But listeners are really interested in pursuing that question, "How are *you* today?" It means that we are, at this moment, willing to set aside time and some concern to hear how it is with you. We are interested not only in the outward you but all of you. We are declaring to you that we are willing to accept you for what you are and what you've experienced. We will not judge you or think less of you or demean you or ridicule you for what you are. That is the meaning of a relationship built on trust. People will often check us out at that point and say, "I suppose you'll think I'm dumb if I tell you" or "I hope you won't laugh if I tell you this." But if the encouragement, the assurance, the acceptance is forthcoming and authentic, that person will begin to share and will find in us a genuine friend that will be deeply appreciated.

The listener's task is not to probe, push, interrogate, but simply to appreciate, accept, encourage, and affirm. The listener's task is not to be an analyst nor to name, nor label, nor diagnose needs. The listener is willing to give attention to the feelings and thoughts which are behind the words and to say "It's okay for you to talk about them with me. I will not be upset or angry or disappointed in you if you share your innermost thoughts." Listening is intended to be a nonjudgmental kind of ministry, and therefore one of forgiveness in its clearest and most personal form. The listener believes that the person he or she is with has value no matter what they have or have not done. Kent Knutson, in *Gospel, Church, Mission,* says this about evangelism:

> *"Evangelism is the communication of the whole Gospel. Grace . . . is spoken to the whole man. It is a manifestation of the grace which is in Christ Jesus to show love both to the body and to the soul, for the body and the soul are simply different ways to speak to the same whole person. . . . If you treat every human being in*

a human way, if you can make a person whole in his spirit, give him hope, train him to become proud of his identity, help him to care for himself and his work, whatever you do to make the Gospel alive, you proclaim the grace of God manifested in Christ Jesus."

The next time you are with a person, listen to the feelings that are behind their words. Try to identify and name the feelings, then check to see if you are right. One of the greatest losses in communication occurs when a person begins to show emotion. It embarrasses or puzzles another person and they immediately make some kind of judgment about the feeling. For instance, if someone you are talking with expresses something of deep feeling and perhaps a tear wells up in their eye, our first reaction is to say, "Don't cry, it will be okay." This is a sort of "healing," mothering-fathering of the person. But perhaps simply talking about that feeling would be the most helpful thing to do. An appropriate kind of response may be, "I see that you have deep feelings about this. Would you like to talk some more about it?" That becomes a way of saying, "I can accept your strong feelings and I can accept you and I would be willing to listen some more to what is deep within you." By saying, "Shh, don't cry," we are saying, "Don't feel. Don't be a human being. Don't be real;" or, "I can't accept you the way you are." Or, if another person becomes physically tense, clenches their fist or teeth, or uses a loud, angry voice, our first reaction is to say, "Oh, don't get angry." Wouldn't a more appropriate response as a listener be, "It sounds to me as though you are very upset or very angry. Let's talk about it"? One does not need to defend another person's emotions. Emotions are a real and important part of us, and by talking about an emotion or a feeling with another person, we grow and clarify our own thoughts and feelings. Much good results from talking about feelings with someone who will really listen.

John Powell in his book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* talks about communication, its risks and its value. He identifies levels of conversation, and says the first level—the easiest topic for discussion—is "things." There is little risk in talking about things because they are so obvious, and are easily measured and controlled.

The second level of conversation is talking about "events." An event involves the dynamics of personal interaction, observation, and interpretation. Second-level conversation is a little more risky. For this reason witnesses are called into a courtroom—to recall and to state what they saw at an event. People see events from different perspectives. Consequently, there is more risk in talking about an event, but there is also more meaning. One can talk about the birth of a baby, the celebration of a birthday, a game, a meal, a job, a worship service, a communion, a baptism. These are events in our lives which have meaning and to which we lend our interpretation.

The third level of conversation involves talking about "ideas." An idea is a collection of several of the meanings inherent in events, experiences, and thoughts which are then formulated into some kind of pattern. There are political ideas, economic ideas, religious ideas, sociological ideas, and psychological ideas, all of which are important parts of our life. But to deal with ideas, to keep them in order, to understand them clearly, and to say what we mean about them is not always easy. We often get into difficulty when trying to express our ideas or to accept the ideas of others. Thus, there is risk in talking about ideas, but there is also growth when we share ideas honestly and openly with another person. This is the principle on which education is based. It is great ideas which fashion our political, educational, and economic systems.

The fourth level of conversation is talking about "beliefs" or "values." This level involves the greatest amount of risk, but it is also where the greatest meaning lies. Beliefs come as decisions and commitments in our life which have grown out of things, events, and ideas. They are formed in the kind of spirit and person that we are. Dealing with beliefs is central to the mystery of being a human being, our being created in the image of God which makes us unique. It is this deeper level of our personhood which makes us special and which needs care and ministry. We are often afraid to talk about our deep convictions because they are mysterious, and often people will have tears in their eyes when they say something about what they believe. But the very fact that there are tears is an indication that it must mean a great deal to that person. How important it is to have someone we can trust and can talk to about beliefs! How important to know that we will be accepted for what we are and will not be ridiculed. Although the greatest risk lies at this level of conversation, there is also the greatest potential for meaning here. Listening gives an okay to another human being. It says, "I am interested not only in your things, your events, and your ideas, but also in your beliefs, convictions, and values."

In marvelous ways Jesus often combined these elements in what we call the parables. He took ideas, events, and things and used them to point to the deep values and beliefs of life that really matter. To talk only about things and avoid always the deep places is to miss life's great meanings, and to reduce the relationship to trivia. The willingness to listen is the willingness to remove the risk for others so they may receive the gospel at the deepest levels of life. It is a willingness which requires time, effort, energy, and above all, the love which tunes in to another person's situation. One of the reasons that many people are so "turned off" in this world is that life has for them become superficial. It is central to the gospel that we be willing to deal with life at its very depths—sin and grace, love and hate, frustration and joy, belief in God, belief in Satan.

Some styles of evangelism function at this level by using the shock-treatment method, by assault, or even by surprise. Though in some cases that may seem effective, it does not build trust or a lasting relationship. Listening is and can be a natural way for people to discover the life in Christ, the Communion of Saints,

and the fellowship of believers. Listening must be cultivated and allowed to grow. Life's friendships take time to mature and deepen. A listening witness ministry is one in which we must invest time, both in preparing ourselves to understand who we are, what we believe, and what our own convictions are, and also in finding time to listen to other people.

Most people are not looking for advice or suggestions, but rather they are hungering for human relationships and for people who are real—not phony—people who are caring and not pushy, people who understand and appreciate human beings, rather than condemn or judge others.

Margery Williams, in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, has put real wisdom into the mouths of toy animals. Listen to this playroom conversation:

> *"What is real?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*
>
> *"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but* really *loves you, then you become Real."*
>
> *"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."*

CHAPTER 4

The Ministry of Witness

"Everyone who invokes the name of the Lord will be saved. How could they invoke one in whom they had no faith? And how could they have faith in one they had never heard of? And how hear without someone to spread the news? And how could anyone spread the news without a commission to do so? And that is what Scripture affirms: How welcome are the feet of the messengers of good news!" (Romans 10:13-15 NEB)

A person who listens does not have as a goal to win, change, or manipulate another person, but instead wants genuinely to relate to them, and thereby to learn to love them. The skill of listening then requires a great deal of "verbal reticence" as Harvey Cox puts it in his *Feast of Fools;* not so quick to give solutions, but rather more eager to find meanings. A listener must think, "I respect you, no matter who you are and what you have done, but I ask and believe that you will be willing to respect me for what I believe and have done as well." This becomes the basis for witness.

Every relationship needs caring, understanding, and listening. But relationships also need truth to grow and survive and to be real. Listening involves my trying to understand you. Witness is my wanting you to understand what I am and what I believe. Having learned to understand another person, my role is not to bear all of their burden, nor to solve all of their problems, nor even to meet all of their needs. The role of a caring Christian is not to be an Atlas but to be a witness. The role of a witness is to share one's beliefs. The basis of witness is, first of all, biblical truths or events or ideas. The Christian witness is, and always must be, a biblically-based witness. A witness is not always quoting Bible verses, though Bible study is certainly central to our growth as Christians. Bible study is not the most helpful in the beginning or intermediate states of relationship building. However, if one is to be a listening witness person, one must have his or her own faith and life put in order by the Word of God so that their beliefs and values are clearly in mind.

In order to be a witness one needs careful training in—and rethinking of—the biblical witness. One needs to understand its truths. Important, too, is training in communication, and some training in the skills of effective witnessing. Those skills we will examine.

The first witness skill is the listening skill—the ability to hear the reasons why this person is turned-off, alienated, inactive. The ability to encourage him or her to talk about the loneliness and hurts that either caused or resulted from their separation from the community of believers is of great value indeed.

The listening skill can be developed to the point where this person is encouraged to articulate his or her *own* attitudes and beliefs. In articulating them he or she is encouraged to examine and evaluate them. A listening witness can enable this person to take the first step toward reconciliation with the community by "confessing," as it were, the reason for the alienation.

In this listening context the words which the witness speaks do not have the condescending character of "what you ought to do." Rather they witness to what it is "I" (or "we") believe.

That, in its simplest form, is the meaning of witness. Witness does not include the words *should, ought,* and *must,* but rather begins with the words, "I believe." The gospel, as Martin Luther says, "comes to us in more than one way. For God is sufficiently rich in his grace." The Bible is literally a whole library of hundreds of witnesses. These witnesses, over thousands of years, tell about their experience with God in their lives. If one listens to their stories (and they are many) one gets a colorful, dramatic, and living picture of the flexibility, creativeness, and uniqueness of God's relating to his people through history. These witnesses include men, women, children, those of both high and low degree, sinners and saints, believers and unbelievers, educated and uneducated.

The temptation is great to oversimplify, to reduce the witness of God into some rigid formula, diminishing the magnitude and the magnificence of God's message in Christ. It is tempting to make the verbal witness long and overbearing. Our witness ought not be a sermon, but rather a meaningful story.

Even as listening concerns learning to listen to "our story," so witness is concerned with "God's story" (Scripture) and telling the other person "my faith story" clearly, simply, and with integrity. Here is one way this can be done: Write down and attempt to analyze the human conditions which you observe in yourself and in others. Think through the biblical witness or story idea which best speaks to that. Then write, in simple sentence form, what you believe about it.

An example: I may struggle with a feeling of low self-worth, the feeling that I cannot do things very well, that I am not liked by other people (and probably not much by God). When a person communicates that kind of feeling about him-

self or herself, what kind of witness should be given? What biblical witness speaks to that? There are at least two good choices. One is the biblical creation story (our createdness in the image of God). A second is the incarnation (God's being born in the flesh, in Jesus Christ, to affirm and to love our humanity). Our witness and conversation in this setting might develop like this: The person says, "I have always felt I would never amount to much. I had a teacher in school once who said I was dumb, and my father said I would never amount to anything, and I guess that's really true. I've made a mess of my life. I guess I'll never amount to anything." The witness response to this person would not be, "Don't feel that way" or "That's not true," because the person has just told you that this *is* the way they feel and that it *is* a very real thing for them. A more appropriate witness statement might be "I believe that God has made all people of worth and of value. I believe that God loves us in our humanity as we are."

Then it is appropriate to listen to how the person perceives your witness statement. If the witness statement is brief, clear, and non-judgmental, the person can then continue talking about what they believe. In this way witness-and-listen, listen-and-witness really becomes a dialog of shared meanings and needs. In the interaction between those two persons there is credibility, acceptance, and appreciation. The question is not "Who wins?" because there is not an argument. The question is, rather, "How did we relate? How did we learn to know each other? Did we grow to become friends?

Another common struggle for many people is a **sense of failure:** having wronged God, wronged another person, or having *been* wronged. What segments of biblical theology address this question? The death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, crucifixion theology, sacrificial theology, and atonement theology are rich resources. A witness statement such as this one could be appropriate: "Just as the father forgave the prodigal son who had sinned and wasted so much, I believe God also forgives me." Or: "I believe that Jesus' death on the cross has brought me the forgiveness of sins and I believe he also forgives you." Or: "I have faith that Jesus is the Savior and promises to forgive."

Again after the witness, it is appropriate to listen so that the conversation may grow and deepen to deal with convictions, beliefs, and values. As one person listens and understands another, the listener's witness also becomes a new idea—and, in a sense, a confrontation—but it is a non-threatening one. It is not appropriate to argue with the belief of another person, but rather to accept it. Both persons accept each other's beliefs and values and come to learn to know each other better.

A third human struggle concerns itself with **the experience of loss.** People suffer loss in a variety of ways. There is loss of home, job, friends, money, or property. Most devastating is loss of life, or the loss of a marriage relationship. Loss brings grief. What segment of biblical theology speaks to this? The theology of the grace of God is appropriate—that dealing with the resurrection victory of

Christ over death. What kind of witness statement might be appropriate? After having listened to expressions of the hurt and the loss, the witness statement may develop like this: "I do believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ," or "I do believe in eternal life by the power of God," or "I believe in the healing, reconciling love of God in Christ."

Of course not all human situations are negative. If we listen and spend time with people we will be confronted with joys as well as hurts and sorrows. All people experience some **achievement** in their life; in fact, people are often willing to talk about such things first—some achievement, some success. What segment of biblical theology relates to this? We could draw upon the theology of the Holy Spirit, or of sanctification, or of creation, or of thanksgiving. We could say, "I really thank God for growth in my life." Or: "I thank God that I have been so blessed." Or: "I thank God for your gifts."

Other human conditions have to do with **joy and well-being.** What biblical theology relates to this? The history of God's care for his people can be addressed. The witness can take this form: "I thank God for this caring grace that he has given to you." A good way to witness in such a situation is to tie sentences together. You could say, "I sense that you are experiencing a great loss in your life and I would like to share with you my belief in God and his resurrection." By tying the "you" statement together with the "I" statement, you have combined both listening and witness. It's important when drawing listening and witness together in our conversation, that the word "but" does not become the connecting word. "But" tends to be a put down—a contrasting or superior—sort of word. If I can tell you that I understand you and that I would like you to understand me and say it in a clear and simple sentence, I've given a marvelous kind of witness. It does take some courage to be that kind of witness in normal conversation. Through training and preparation, however, and with a rationale as to why we relate to—and care about—one another, it becomes possible. As one learns to judge accurately when specific kinds of witness statements are appropriate, the skill of witnessing becomes a fulfilling and satisfying task. Witness should not be lengthy or overwhelming, but brief and to the point. Sometimes in an hour's conversation there may be spoken only a few sentences of actual witness, but if those witness statements are clear and sincere they can have tremendous impact.

One does not always see dramatic and sudden change in the person with whom witness has been shared, but as Paul once wrote, "Apollos planted, Paul watered, but God gives the increase." We need to trust that God is at work both before our conversation and after. We are part of a long history of witnesses and believers. We do not carry the whole load on our own back. God's Holy Spirit and the love of God are operative in the world around us. We ought not try to bear the whole load as if it were all up to us. That would be frightening. But we need rather to sense that we are in a partnership as members of the church and of the body of Christ. This ministry of witness goes on in public ways as

well, through preaching and teaching, and through the Word and sacraments. The ministry goes on through the personal, conversational witness of the communion of saints in ordinary places. Your listening witness is a part of the whole evangelism outreach of the congregation.

William Hordern, in his book *Living By Grace*, says,

> *"A traditional form of evangelism threatened eternal punishment and hell while offering the promise of eternal bliss in heaven. Caught between the stick from behind and the carrot in front, the candidate for conversion rather plainly got the idea that, for his own good, he'd better get on the bandwagon and do the appropriate things to assure his heavenly reward and escape the fires of hell."*

This raises a serious problem for Christians. They hesitate to point to themselves as examples to be followed because they are keenly aware that they are still sinners. They have not attained perfection, therefore each of them must continually seek God's forgiveness. To some degree, all Christians fail to practice what they preach. But that is not really the point. Witness to others does not depend upon moral perfection or the excellence of lives; it depends upon loving concern for the other. People will be attracted to the Christian faith when they find that a Christian is concerned about them, is ready to share their burdens, and accepts them as they are.

HUMAN CONDITION	THEOLOGY	WITNESS	SCRIPTURE
Low self-image, rejection of self and others, self-blaming, lack of confidence	Incarnation of Jesus in the flesh Creation	Affirmation of our humanity as God's creation God's love	Genesis 1:26-27, 31 Isaiah 43:1 1 John 3:19
Moral failure, wronged by self or others, guilt or anger, sense of sin	Crucifixion of Jesus for our sins Forgiveness	Forgiveness of sins Grace and mercy of God	Romans 5:62 1 John 1:9
Loss of loved ones, death, divorce, discouragement, loss of purpose	Theology of the Cross Resurrection of Jesus Victor over death	Aliveness of God Jesus' victorious presence Joy	Romans 5:1-2; 6:4-5 Philippians 4:4-7
Sense of well-being Blessed	Thanksgiving Celebration	Gratitude toward God Goodness of God	Psalm 150 Psalm 8

CHAPTER 5

People as Gift and Gospel

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. . . . For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 3:1-3; 4:1-2, 5, RSV).

The purpose of witness ministry to inactives is not to call attention to how good the church is or how good Christians are, but rather to point to God's truth, in God's Word and in God's purposes. The mere presence of the witness in the home becomes a confrontation—an in-the-flesh confrontation as the gospel addresses itself to the human condition in which the person finds himself or herself. It is a gentle confrontation rather than a threatening one; supportive rather than destructive.

The word "witness" comes from the Greek word *martyr* (from which we derive the English word of the same spelling). A martyr is a person who offers their whole life for what they believe. Witness is not simply a tossing out of words; it is person-to-person sharing about that which concerns life and faith. One of the characteristics of the early Christian church was a confidence and boldness with which the faith was shared. That boldness was neither aggressive nor destructive; yet it had a saving concern for preaching, healing, and ministering. One of the tragedies of the modern church is the way in which the gospel has been used as an internal balm—comforting the faithful. We hardly recognize

the gospel as a power to energize the church to live the faith. We have many comfortable Christians but few courageous Christians. We have seen the church as a fortress and protector. Seldom have we seen the church as the launching pad, the base camp for witness and ministry in the world.

As he encountered people, Jesus both loved them and confronted them. He could be very gentle with the sick, the hurt, and the needy, but would often ask them incisive and probing questions: What do you want? What do you believe? What are you doing? What does life mean to you? The questions and method with which Jesus did ministry made people aware of his love for them but also made them think and act. He was not afraid to say, "Come and follow me," "Go and wash yourself in the pool," or, "Sell all that you have and give to the poor," or even (in an extreme case), "Get behind me Satan."

The goal of listening witness is to establish a relationship in which there is a caring and loving understanding of the other, a courageous willingness to proclaim what the Scriptures say. I am willing to accept you where you are, but I also am eager for both of us to change and to grow and to become. Listening is not an acceptance of the status quo but rather assumes that I am living, learning, and growing. Faith is not merely an acceptance of some ancient truths: it is also a current mode of operation which makes a difference in present life. My faith is changing. It is freeing and enabling me to be a person. I want you to know, as I listen to you and care about you, that I respect you for what and who you are; that I can accept you; that I will make every effort to understand you. But I also want you to know that I am a believer. And that becomes a confrontation that is not threatening, but has dynamic potential. It is not because I confront you with my own ego and my own goodness. In fact, as we visit and share together, you will soon discover that I am a sinner with weakness and needs as surely as you, and that I acknowledge any strengths which I have as gifts from God. I also understand that you struggle with sin and mistakes and disappointments, yet I affirm that you also have strengths and gifts from God. Both of us are at the same time sinner and saint, and God understands that better even than do we. If I confront you with who I am and what I believe, I also want you to confront me with who you are and what you believe. I will listen to understand you as carefully as I know how. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for Salvation to everyone who believes"— to *everyone* who *believes.*

Listening and witness, then, keeps me from supposing that you are "the bad person" with all the needs and that I am "the good person" who can help you. That would be an unrealistic understanding of what life and people—and the church—are. Rather, listening witness is a dialog—two of us sharing what is meaningful concerning God's power at work in both of us.

God's saving activity is never finished; it is a continuing activity wherever there is life. And yet, there is a sense in which—through faith—the *fullness* of grace is

received. Paul talks in Romans 5 about "the grace in which we stand." There is that assurance that one lives by grace, even in the moments when one sins and disappoints both self and others. God's grace surrounds and renews us, prompting us to be aware of that sin, to confess it, and to find freedom again. The law is always conditional. It is a declaration of right and wrong—either we have obeyed it and fulfilled it or we have not. One is never quite sure if they have ever done enough. Law leads, therefore, to insecurity (one feels they have not fulfilled it) on the one hand, or pride and self-righteousness (one believes that they have obeyed it) on the other. Neither despair nor self-righteousness should ever be a complete description of how a person lives and faces reality. Rather, grace should describe the understanding of one's life under God: God accepts everyone as they are, helps them to grow, and may even give them law to teach and to guide (but law is not the basis for the relationship).

A listening witness relationship is not a law relationship but is rather a gracious relationship of hearing, caring, and simultaneous witnessing and growing. It has the potential for constructive and dynamic interaction between two persons and for the interaction of God in our midst. Jesus has promised that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." By prayerful preparation and a conscious involvement of God in our life, those kinds of visits and conversations can break through the crusts of life's superficiality or triviality. New depth and growth can result. Like the conditioning and stretching of muscles of the body, so the exercise of faith in conversation with a caring Christian stretches the muscle fiber of faith to a new discovery of life's meaning. Faith that has been dormant, unchallenged, and uncultivated weakens and even dies. A visit by a listening witness person in the home of another Christian is a spiritual exercise—gentle but real, caring but provocative, loving yet growing.

The opposite of listening witness is simply doing nothing. The result for others —and for us—is abandonment, rejection, or the lack of growth. In the book of Hebrews, Christians are encouraged to "stir up one another to faith and good works." A listening witness to the inactives is that gentle but real stirring and awakening to the spirit of God and his power to salvation. We pray for the courage and willingness to experience this stirring. If some Christians are not able to come to worship where the "stirring" of liturgy, preaching, prayers, and personal interaction occurs, it is incumbent upon the Christian church to go to the homes and places of work where such people are. We go to "stir," gently and caringly. A confrontation ought not be aggressive or destructive, but rather given over to listening and relationship-building.

Most people, in an entire lifetime, have only two or three very close friends with whom they can relate. People long for honest conversation about things that really matter. Those persons who become defensive and fearful when someone begins to get to the heart of the matter need an extra measure of care and love so that they are not hurt. Almost all of us have been hurt by those who carelessly or insensitively draw judgments on us. We become cautious, sometimes even

suspicious, when people too abruptly or too forcefully probe into our mind, body, and spirit. Listening witness is a gentle confrontation which is willing and able to grow and to progress, but only at a pace comfortable to the one visited.

At the same time a listening witness caller needs to have the patience, sensitivity, and judgment to gauge how the inactive person is understanding and accepting the situation. The skillful use of feedback–seeking response, in the midst of which will come verbal and non-verbal signals–is essential. Seeking opportunities for further conversation and additional time in the developing of the relationship and friendship should be seriously considered. The visitor could say, "We really have had a good talk this evening and maybe we could visit again." Or: "We've been able to talk about some important things tonight; would you like to talk again? We could continue where we stopped tonight." Or: "I sense that we have gotten into some sensitive areas that perhaps we both would need some time to think about before we visit again." We need to be alert to clues which indicate that we are progressing. Simultaneously, we need to seek permission to have that progression continue. We need to be caring and affirming at such moments, even as we have learned to be in the conversations themselves.

It has taken some courage and honesty for the inactive to have shared with you as they have. They might say something like this: "You're the first person I've ever told this to," or "You are such an easy person to talk to, I didn't ever dream we would be talking about this." Accept that confidence respectfully and assure the person that what has been said is confidential and will not be repeated to anyone, not even to a pastor, without the permission of the person with whom you have visited.

Finally, thank the person for the time. Friendship has begun. Try to build that friendship into a quality relationship so that the next time you see this person both of you will recognize the friendship. And even though the ideas and truths shared in this visit may never be mentioned again in your relationship, you are both aware that you have shared with one another something of the meaning of life. In so doing you have shared together the power of the gospel while sharing some of life's very personal and ordinary things as well.

CHAPTER 6

How to Start a Ministry to the Inactives

"After this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'." (Luke 10:1-9, RSV)

It is important for a church council, evangelism committee, or outreach committee to spend considerable time planning for its ministry to inactives. It is important that the congregation's ministry to inactive members be incorporated into the total evangelism ministry to the community.

Where the congregation has no evangelism program, it would be well to plan a series of sessions for Bible study and priority-setting, in order to determine the need for the ministry of the gospel in the community. It would be helpful to take a look at the community to focus on areas of greatest need, the target area immediately around the church, the geography of evangelism, the theology of evangelism, and the target group(s)—single persons, elderly, youth, single parent families, unchurched, "inactive" church members, prospective church members, church visitors and those who are worshipping in order to grow and be challenged in their faith.

Once your congregation has reached conclusions on those significant questions, write a brief objective statement as to the nature and task of the evangelism committee in your congregation. This well-thought-out plan should then be submitted for approval to the decision-making boards, committees, or council of your congregation. The statement should indicate how many people you need, length of time involved, your expectations of them, and the kind of support, training, and guidance you will give them. Once you have that goal of evangelism written on paper and in your minds, you are ready to begin recruiting participants.

A great deal of care should be given to the recruitment of persons for evangelism ministry. Just as we carefully select and train Sunday school teachers, council members, choir members, youth leaders, etc., the same care needs to be given in the recruitment, training, and support of evangelism persons. It is important to communicate with each person, explaining as clearly and succinctly as possible how you view this task and how you believe this person can fulfill the task.

The recruitment process involves looking for people who have gifts in relating to, and caring about, others. The "flashiest" and most talkative persons do not necessarily make the best listening witnesses. But rather, look for those people with the gifts of sensitivity, faithfulness, attentiveness, and genuine caring for other human beings. They may not all possess confidence, but that can be built up through training and encouragement. Natural gifts of caring for others comes from the spirit of God and through prayer.

Three months before you are ready to begin the training would be an appropriate time to begin recruiting callers. At the same time, publicize the total evangelism program for the congregation through bulletins, newspapers, and announcements. Be sure to include in all publicity the goal and purpose of the program. If it is your goal to recruit 10 persons you may need to send out 20 to 30 letters or make as many calls on potential candidates. Then either the pastor or chairperson of the evangelism committee should spend time visiting each family or person in order to model the listening witness ministry. Listen to the needs, hurts, feelings, and gifts of the person you visit. Encourage and enable them to share their beliefs as well. Make it not only a visit to invite them to fulfill a task, but also a model experience of how caring, listening-witnessing conversation can progress to a new level of friendship and understanding.

Even if the person is unable to accept the invitation to listening witness ministry the visit will have been meaningful for both of you. This visit can affirm the gifts of the one visited and explain possibilities for growth and development of those gifts through training, support, Bible study, prayer, and skill training.

The next step is the actual training itself. The training of visitors needs to be an experience in group dynamics and growth. A comfortable room should be chosen—not a classroom setting where chairs are in rows, but a more informal

kind of place where people can see each other and can participate in informal conversation as well as formal training. A chalkboard or some newsprint should be available for large writing, and people should be asked to bring their Bibles each week.

Each weekly training session could consist of one hour of Bible study with a break followed by 45 minutes of skill training. A chart at the end of this chapter, and an appendix following, illustrate how those Bible studies could progress. It is very important in the skill training to enable practice conversation, and to model group experiences in which people become familiar with learning and sharing with one another in a new kind of openness and understanding. As trainer, the pastor or lay leader has a tremendous opportunity to build confidence, closeness, and the development of each person's gift as he or she offers it to the group. And as a person's needs are met for their own faith and growth they will become more confident and less defensive working with other people in their faith, life, and growth. Since Bible study is focused on a purpose and training on a goal, the training experience becomes a marvelous kind of growth movement toward meaningful tasks. As the training progresses, anxiety will be reduced and excitement about possibilities for dealing with persons will increase.

After three or four group meetings with Bible study and skill training, have the members, in groups of two or three persons, accompany the pastor on a listening witness visit. The pastor should make the arrangements by calling the family to inform them that he and some members of the training group of listening witnesses would like to visit in their home—fellow members visiting fellow members. Tell them exactly how many wish to come. Usually, if one is honest and open about the purpose of your visit, most people are receptive and willing to have you come. If for some reason someone is apprehensive or ill at ease, it would be best not to bring several persons. But more often than not, people are glad to have you come. That visit, then, should be as natural as possible. The intent is not that lay learners simply observe, but that they may participate as they feel comfortable doing so. Modeling listening skills, observing the progression of conversation to significant issues, and detecting opportunities for witness of faith ought to occur.

After the visit has been completed, go to some comfortable place and visit with the training members about what they have observed. They should express their observations of verbal and non-verbal communication, sensitivity to feelings, evident barriers to communication, and what kind of progression they thought occurred. This becomes extremely valuable learning time in a practical setting, builds confidence and insight, and develops skills and understanding of how we relate to other persons. Some people may wish to participate in more than one training visit with the pastor. The regular class time should be suspended until those calls have been made. When this is done with more than one group those who have first gone visiting with the pastor can later take other visitors with them and lead the same kind of supervised learning experience as did the pastor.

In their anxiety, the training participants often talk too much and restraint is sometimes needed to enable the person we are visiting to be at home and at ease. This can best be done if the training group is also at ease as observant listeners, yet also willing to enter into conversation and sharing about that which really matters in life.

The fourth stage in the training of listening witness people is a commissioning service in which the whole congregation participates and supports these people in ministry. As the end of the training process draws near, it is important to give participants a clear understanding of the expected commitment. For example, visitors could be asked to visit for one year and to make two calls a month. This is both a possible goal and a manageable task, reasonably limited and definable. The commitment may be renewed if it is their wish, but should not be imposed indefinitely in the beginning. A suggestion for encouraging support to listening witness people is to invite spouses to the last meeting, so that they can meet the other people with whom their spouse has been sharing time, excitement, and friendship the past months. This can be done in the form of a dinner—to visit, talk together, share with spouses, and generally celebrate the completion of this training event. This can help spouses to better understand the kind of ministry in which their partner is involved. And there is an added dividend: participants' spouses in this way affirm and build confidence in their mates for the task before them.

Then, as a part of a service on Sunday morning, the listening witness people are brought before the congregation at all the services for that day. Once again, brief overview is given so that the congregation understands and supports the listening witness ministry. The whole congregation responds in prayer at a commissioning service. And, through regular parish publicity the monthly meetings of these participants are listed, keeping their ministry in the consciousness of all the membership.

The fifth part of the program is on-going support. The group goes out two by two with one another's support. It is important for them to meet monthly to renew the bonds of fellowship and friendship they have established during the training program; it is a time to talk over needs and feelings and also to do continuing Bible study. The results of the visits should remain confidential, however. The purpose of the meeting is not to talk over what happened in certain homes or what people said. General kinds of concerns, biblical questions, and renewing of skills—especially Bible study and prayer—become ways of giving support. There are both joys and disappointments in working with people and we need to be honest about both. To study the Scriptures, to fellowship, celebrate, to laugh and to cry—all are ways in which we as the body of Christ are together in support and concern for one another.

Record keeping is also important. One person who has the time and skill for keeping good records should be commissioned to that task. A card file should be

kept on all visits and all visitors. Each visitor should have a master card so that it can be known who that visitor is assigned to visit and if and when the visits were completed. It is interesting and worthwhile to report at the end of the year how many visitors have been at work and how many visits were completed. Only the barest facts should be written on cards (for confidential and personal reasons); such information as change of address or names of children may be noted, but no personal information about their home and life should be written. If the visitor should find their ministry to that family was not as meaningful as they would have wished and in their judgment, someone else could or should do ministry there, that card could then be referred, but without any prejudicial information.

It is the pastor's prerogative to look over the file to see who has been visited, and occasionally, a visitor may make a note that it would be appropriate for the pastor to call. That kind of lay and clergy team ministry can provide a very meaningful experience. There need not be any information shared except that this family would wish to have the pastor call. The joy of discovering and learning afresh from each other far outweighs the need for any kind of unnecessary pre-information and builds trust and understanding between people. The purpose of evangelism is not "gossip" but rather sharing a friendship.

The word *evangelism* has a bad connotation for some people. It is often associated with religious hucksterism, whereby smooth-talking preachers roll into town and, for a series of evening meetings, whip up emotion and enormous offerings and then leave town. With hallelujahs and "Praise the Lord" echoing through town, life goes back to normal. Evangelism is rather for the long-term relationship of community-building, creating, and recreating loving faith relationships between people, and between people and God. Evangelism is not manipulation, but ministry. It is affirming persons rather than attacking their weaknesses. It is sharing life's meanings rather than shocking people with life's sins. It is loving people where they are rather than labeling people for what they are not. It is bearing good news about what God has done rather than bemoaning the bad news of what we have not done. It is building a community on the relationship of trust rather than isolating individuals on the basis of heroic righteousness. Evangelism is built on the gracious, saving, and redemptive activity of God in Christ, not the gimmickry of human organization.

So as we proceed with the tasks of listening and of witnessing, we remain very humbly conscious of our limits. We are not simply using techniques, but we are using them as human beings in the presence of the real love of God. That leads both to humility and to a confidence made possible by the spirit of God. The task of ministry always involves joy deeply mixed with pain. We never experience only complete joy or complete pain, any more than we are completely sinful or completely saintly. But we live in the midst of the ambiguity of what it means to be a human person under God.

A MODEL FOR LISTENING WITNESS TRAINING

	MODULE A		MODULE B	MODULE C
STEPS 1 - 4	45 MINUTES BIBLICAL/ THEOLOGICAL	15 MINUTES COFFEE	45 MINUTES COMMUNICATION SKILL TRAINING	45 MINUTES COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS
	STEP 5 FIELD EXPERIENCES			
STEPS 6 - 7	45 MINUTES BIBLICAL/ THEOLOGICAL	15 MINUTES COFFEE	45 MINUTES COMMUNICATION SKILL TRAINING	45 MINUTES COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS
	STEP 8 FELLOWSHIP MEAL			
	STEP 9 COMMISSIONING			

APPENDIX: NOTES ON STEPS IN THE TRAINING MODEL

MODULE A — **STEP 1**

Study Acts chapter 1 and Matthew chapter 28. Discuss the Great Commission of Christ. Study 1 Peter, concentrating on the Royal Priesthood concept. Explore the nature of the Christian call. Consider Baptism as a call to ministry.

MODULE B

Have the group spend some time getting to know one another. Each should tell something about him/herself. Share each one's feelings about the word "evangelism." Chart these and discuss (allow both positive and negative feelings to surface).

MODULE C

Lead the group in an examination of their attitudes toward "inactive" members. Ask the group to role play, first as "actives" then as "inactives," in both cases (a) identifying feelings about themselves and (b) labelling the opposite group. Refer to the chart on page 12 (but don't let it shape your discussion or discoveries).

MODULE A — **STEP 2**

Study Luke chapter 15. Is the concept of "lostness" in these parables evaluative or descriptive? Do we become judgmental when calling someone "lost?" Study Romans 12.

MODULE B

Discuss Powell's four levels of conversation (see pages 21-22). Discuss Luther's suggestion (page 16) that the gospel comes "in more than one way." Affirm conversation as a gospel ministry tool available to all.

MODULE C

Explore the phenomena of "turned-off" church members. Refer to chapter 2. Test the thesis that those who avoid the church are (a) drifting (b) hurt or (c) changing.

MODULE A — **STEP 3**

Study 2 Corinthians 5:16-19. Discuss reconciliation as a good biblical model for evangelism. Study 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

MODULE B

Have individuals in the group divide the reading of Bonhoeffer's "Ministry of holding one's tongue" and "Listening" (pages 17-18). Practice listening to one another. Share what is discovered about listening.

MODULE C

Discuss and chart some appropriate and inappropriate vehicles for evangelism. Refer to pages 13-14 (but don't let it limit your group's discoveries).

STEP 4

MODULE A

Study the Apostles' Creed. Stress the importance of believing and communicating the "whole gospel." Study 2 Corinthians 4:13-16 and Luke 10:1-9.

MODULE B

In discussion, identify and accept feelings and needs of others in a non-judgmental way. How can this be done for "inactives"? Explore ways of speaking with conviction without alienating or overwhelming others.

MODULE C

Build skills for making calls in homes. Refer to chapters 3 and 4.

STEP 6

MODULE A

Study John chapter 4. Focus on Jesus' method in conversing with the woman at the well. Study Luke chapter 8. Apply.

MODULE B

Discuss witnessing as the effective use of "I believe" statements. Refer to the chart on page 29. Your group may have additional contributions. Have the group role play.

MODULE C

Have some participants divide the reading of the quote from "The Velveteen Rabbit," page 23. Discuss and evaluate how the church welcomes and receives people. Do we function sensitively or rather as an "in group?"

STEP 7

MODULE A

Study 2 Corinthians 3:1-6; Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 5:22; Romans 12:3-12.

MODULE B

Discuss your group's anxieties, strengths, resources. Invite each to share examples of all of the above which they feel now. Encourage all to strengthen one another with understanding and support.

MODULE C

Develop a mutually acceptable record system; discuss procedure for phoning, use of visitor cards, teaming, and follow-up. Refer to pages 37-38.

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